

Planting, Watering, Growing
I Corinthians 3:4-11
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Well, this isn't exactly how we expected to come back together, is it? Someone once told me that life is what happens on the way to what we think is going to happen, and I've found that to be true over and over again. I have missed you all very much, and even under the circumstances of my return, it is really good to see you again and to worship with you.

The reason for my early return and my hope for our remaining time together is to help this church move smoothly into a time of transition. We are a healthy, vibrant church, and I want CCC to stay a healthy, vibrant church well beyond my time here. I am committed to doing everything I can to help prepare this church for the future that God has planned for you. I am looking forward to continuing to work together right up until Oct. 25. And then, even as I go, I trust that God will remain, continuing to be with you, guiding you forward into the next chapter in the life of Community Christian Church.

But that is a chapter that has yet to be written, and that's a bit scary. We don't know what is coming next. Knowledge is power, so when we don't know what is coming, we feel powerless. I know the difficult emotions I have been dealing with the last few months – fear, sadness, uncertainty – so I can only imagine you have felt some of the same. When it comes to our future, we don't want to be surprised. But in situations like this, we don't have a choice. All we do know is that the chapter that is to come is going to be different than the chapters that have come before.

And that means the dreaded “C” word: change. Many of us don't do well with change. I think I'm a bit like Calvin from the Calvin and Hobbes cartoons. Calvin and Hobbes are speeding down a hill in their little red wagon. Calvin shouts to his tiger, “I thrive on change!” Hobbes replies, “You? You threw a fit this morning because your mom put less jelly on your toast than yesterday.” Calvin revises his statement, “I thrive on making other people change.”

One of the great ironies is that we are often so resistant to change, and yet our lives are constantly changing. Author William Bridges says we are in a “semi-permanent state of transitionality,” which is a complicated way of saying nothing ever stays the same. And we don't always like that. I saw a bumper sticker that captures this perfectly. It said: “Change is good. Unless it happens.” It's so easy to get accustomed to the familiar and the comfortable that change can be seen as a negative thing, something to be avoided at all costs.

And yet, everything is constantly changing – our culture, our churches, even our own bodies. Our bodies are undergoing such constant change that, because of cell regeneration, you are a totally new person every five to seven years. So if you don't like someone, wait five to seven years and give them another chance. Science confirms this statement about change. Science has taught us that every living entity is constantly changing. Scientists have even agreed upon a term to describe those entities that are not undergoing constant change. That term is “dead.”

We are changing people who live in a world of change, and that can be scary, especially when change comes about unexpectedly. But the Bible tells us we are not alone because we worship a God of change. God says in Isaiah, “See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare.” The psalmist encourages to, “sing to the Lord a new song.” Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians that if anyone believes in Christ, they are a new creation. Like Calvin, I believe God thrives on making people change.

And there's good reason for that. Newton's first law of physics is that a body at rest tends to stay at rest. And you know what happens if you stay too long in one place. If I've sat in a chair too long, when I stand up my knees snap, crackle and pop like a bowl of cereal. A body that stays at rest finds that to be a pretty comfortable place, and will resist being moved from it, much like my knees resist being put into action.

I believe God applies that principle to us as people and as a church. A church body at rest tends to stay at rest, which is the opposite of movement. A church at rest is a church that isn't moving, isn't growing, isn't striving to progress in faith and service. A church at rest is antithetical to the definition of who we were called to be people.

As early as the Garden of Eden, the God of change put people on the move. He came to Noah and said, "You're moving! Build an ark." He came to Abraham and said, "You're moving! Pack up your things." He came to Moses and said, "You're moving! Head to Egypt. Take your swimsuit." He came to the Israelites and said, "You're moving! Don't forget your sunscreen." The life of faith is life on the move.

I saw a cartoon once with a husband and wife on the back of a camel, trudging through the desert. The wife keeps asking, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" The man turns around and says, "We will never be there, Dear. We're nomads, remember?" As followers of Christ, we are nomads, never called to be at rest, but to always be on the move.

That's the truth I've discovered over the past few months. Before this new call came, my family and I weren't planning to move. We love it here, we love this church. We were comfortable. But God came to us and said, "You're moving! I'm sending you to a land flowing with milk and honey, or at least bluegrass and horse manure. You're going home." And now, there's a For Sale sign in our front yard and we are beginning to contemplate the reality of saying goodbye to the best church family we have ever known.

Even as challenging as this concept of change has been for me, I'm very aware of the challenge it presents for you, as well. You may not know this, but churches don't tend to do change very well. In a world that is constantly shifting like sand around us, church should be the one constant, the one place to find stability, the one thing that doesn't change. And then the pastor resigns and even church is no longer safe from change.

But here's another paradox for you (you know I love that word!) when it comes to this: the God who thrives on making people change doesn't change. I don't mean that God is frozen or that God is unresponsive to us. What I mean is that God's character is consistent, that God's faithfulness is enduring. That's why the psalmist can talk about God as a rock and a fortress, our ever-present companion during times of change. That's why the author of Hebrews writes in Ch. 13, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." The church is a human institution, which means it's going to be subject to change, just as any other human institution. But the foundation of that institution, the God in whom we place all our trust and hope, is not going to change, will never leave us.

In fact, I'm not even sure the word "change" applies in this case. Sure, on a surface level things are changing. I'm leaving, someone else will be coming in, leadership changes, ways of doing things will change. But at a deeper level something more fundamental, more exciting is happening. What the world calls change, God calls "transformation." We change our clothes; we transform our souls. Any time of transition has the potential for transformation.

The question we can ask is: if we are changing, what are we changing into? If we are transforming, what are we becoming? We know something is ending, and because of the strong emotions associated with that, we tend to forget that this means that something new will be

beginning. And in the meantime, we enter into what William Bridges calls “the neutral zone,” the time between endings and beginnings which he describes as a “transformative experience.” We may be afraid of that transformation because we don’t know what we’ll look like on the other side of it, but God assures us that God will be with us as we go through the process. Because we know this, we can lean into the future, eyes wide open, looking for ways to continue our journey of faith, expectant about what God is going to do through us.

This is what Paul is talking about in the passage from 1 Corinthians. Different leaders in the church have different roles to play in how that congregation develops. For the Corinthians, Paul planted the church and Apollos watered it with his teaching and preaching. For this church, you could say that Don Lanier planted the seed, Nelson Irving watered it, others have provided sunlight or nourishment. And there may be a few weeds mixed in there. I hope my time with you has been a time of blossoms and bountiful harvests. But the truth is that, no matter what we contribute to the nurture of the church, it is God who makes it grow. Pastors and church leaders come and go, each doing their part. But it is our ever-present God who is constant and abiding, encouraging growth and nourishing us.

That’s why I think you could argue there are no endings in our faith, because every ending is a new beginning. Jesus’ ending on the cross provides some pretty strong evidence for that, doesn’t it? Endings lead to beginnings. Death leads to new life. My leaving means new leadership, new energy and new directions. Our time together is short, and that makes me very sad. Once I leave this place, I will be praying for your continued growth in faithfulness and service. I’ll be watching eagerly to see what you will become. But until then, we have a lot of work to do together as we prepare for the transformation. I love you, I am committed to serving you, and I am excited about your future. I believe God has amazing things in store for Community Christian Church, and I want each of you to be part of it. Our unchanging God is calling us to change, and that is a good thing. Thanks be to God.